

Case study



Yorkshire and Humber Assembly

It can often be valuable to include the views of all stakeholders when putting in place a policy on diversity. The Yorkshire and Humber Assembly developed its diversity strategy by working jointly with staff, management, union representatives and Acas.



Acas provided training to all staff and ongoing support is available if required. The Assembly is now equipped with the skills and knowledge to take forward its diversity strategy¹.

Background

The Yorkshire and Humber Assembly is one of eight regional assemblies in England. As the 'voice of the region' its role is to make representations on behalf of the region in the UK and Europe. It works in partnership with local authorities, businesses, community and voluntary organisations to promote the interests of the region. Its remit covers the economy, education and skills, transport infrastructure, the environment and quality of life.

As an employer, the Assembly are keen to be at the forefront of employment relations best practice. They consult regularly with staff to enhance working conditions.

The Assembly currently employs around forty people (permanent and temporary staff) and has offices in Wakefield and Brussels, with the majority of staff based in Wakefield. Unison is the recognised trade union at the Assembly.

The decision to use Acas

One of the Assembly's key objectives is to make Yorkshire and Humber a socially cohesive and inclusive region. Promoting diversity within the region and building links with ethnic minority communities is a core part of their strategy to enhance quality of life within the region. The Assembly already had an equal opportunities policy in place, which complied with the law. However, they wished to extend this to encompass a diversity policy, which would promote a fair and diverse workforce. In developing this new diversity strategy, management wanted to ensure that the

¹ This case study is based on interviews carried out by Turnstone Research and Consultancy with the Acas adviser, as well as the HR Manager for Yorkshire and Humber. We are grateful for interviewees' assistance and reflections on the Acas project.



policy was seen as reasonable and based on common sense, rather than on notions of 'political correctness'. Thus the purpose of a diversity strategy would achieve the following:

- Encourage a more diverse workforce, including older people, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities;
- Demonstrate the Assembly's commitment to diversity to staff;
- Promote diversity in the region by setting a good example to other partners and local businesses.

The whole organisation is about striving to achieve best practice. So for us to not have an educated diversity policy in place is unacceptable. We wanted a policy on diversity and we wanted staff trained so they had an understanding of what diversity was.

Yorkshire and Humber Assembly HR manager

The Assembly felt that Acas' experience in the mediation and employment relations field made them an ideal partner to assist them in developing an internal diversity strategy.

What was Acas' involvement?

A programme of work was agreed with the Assembly. The key features of these are set out in the following sections.

Developing a new diversity policy

A joint-working approach, which involved management and trade unions, was adopted. Both management and the union were equally committed to the joint-working process. They recognised the benefits of ensuring that all perspectives within the organisation were represented when deciding this new policy.

An initial policy was drafted by the Acas adviser. A Diversity Working Group comprising the HR manager, staff volunteers, trade union officials, and a local trade union representative, was set up to consult on the draft policy and finalise a working policy.



Staff training on Diversity

Having achieved a written policy that met the Assembly's needs, the next stage was to launch a programme of training across the Assembly. The purpose of the training was to introduce staff to the principles of diversity best practice and to familiarise them with the implications of their new policy. Four half-day sessions took place with managers and members of staff, in which all – from receptionists to senior operational and policy staff – were required to attend. Assembly directors introduced each staff training session to demonstrate to staff their commitment to the new diversity policy.

The training covered the following:

- The difference between equal opportunities and diversity;
- Introduction to anti-discrimination legislation as well as staff and management's roles and responsibilities;
- Discussion on the Assembly's new diversity policy: the implications for the organisation, plus appropriate procedures for complaints and grievances.

Ensuring a mix of people from different departments and backgrounds in each training session helped to generate lively debate. Allowing time for discussion was especially valuable in helping staff to air concerns about how the diversity policy was going to affect them.

There was a resistance to not going totally overboard with diversity so that nobody dare say anything. There is so much legislation quoted that it does come across as 'big-stick' stuff. But that wasn't the intention at all from either the Assembly's management or our point of view. People were worried and frightened that it was going to constrain them but we explained that it was all about common sense.

Acas adviser

Launching the new diversity policy

Following the internal training programme, final amendments are being made to the policy by the Working Group. Plans have been set in motion to ensure the policy is implemented throughout the organisation, looking at how the Assembly can engage with its partners and external stakeholders. Over the next twelve months, the

Diversity Working Group plan action on the following:

- Annual staff refresher training, and further training for Senior managers and members of the Diversity Working Group;
- Applying the policy to recruitment and selection procedures;
- Integration of the new diversity policy into induction and training;
- Ensuring diversity is woven into the fabric of the Assembly's work, eg event planning, printed materials;
- Ensuring mechanisms to review progress;
- Extending the diversity policy to include harassment and 'dignity at work'.

Outcomes of Acas' involvement

Acas' input was felt by the Assembly to be a worthwhile investment of time. They were able to provide expert advice on what to include in the diversity policy and how the new policy should be tailored to meet the Assembly's needs. The involvement of staff, managers and the trade union in developing the detail of the policy means that the Assembly now have a policy which has the commitment of managers, staff and the union. The Assembly also believe they have achieved a policy that is reasonable and based on common sense, rather than one that falls into the trap of being overly 'politically correct'. What has been most important is that all participants feel that Acas' and the trade union's involvement, lent credibility to an issue that may have lacked status with staff. This and the commitment of the management team and the Diversity Working Group will no doubt contribute to the successful launch of the Assembly's new diversity strategy. As the HR manager commented:

It's been really good working with themI think they have given the whole process credibility – that was the one most important thing for me. Acas have got a status about them. People have heard of them, they know what they stand for.

For further details please contact Acas Research and Evaluation at research@acas.org.uk

